

LBJ got reluctant Warren to lead assassination panel

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WASHINGTON — When Chief Justice Earl Warren refused to head a presidential commission to investigate the assassination of President Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson applied his legendary arm-twisting tactics.

Johnson made various appeals to Warren's patriotism, finally expressing fears that post-assassination panic could trigger a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. As LBJ told it, the chief justice "started crying" and caved in.

The browbeating, folksiness and



JOHNSON

gruff charm of LBJ spring to life in newly released transcripts of his taped telephone conversations in the first 35 days of his presidency nearly 30 years ago.

In the documents made public Wednesday, Johnson grapples with Republican opposition to a civil-rights bill, rides herd on legislation for higher education, counts votes in Congress and seeks advice on Vietnam, Cuba and other foreign hot spots.

But more than anything else, LBJ's phone calls reveal the consummate politician at work, a man never too busy to contact an old friend recovering from illness, cagily hand scraps of news to sympathetic publishers and columnists, congratulate football coaches on their gridiron exploits or tout his

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own powers of persuasion.

Here's Johnson telling his one-time Senate mentor Richard Russell, D-Ga., on Nov. 29, 1963, how he cajoled the chief justice into chairing the hyper-sensitive assassination commission by mentioning the possibility of a U.S.-Soviet confrontation:

"Warren told me he wouldn't do it under any circumstances ... didn't think the Supreme Court justice ought to go on ... I called him and ordered him down here and he didn't want to come.

"I insisted he come ... (he) came down here and told me *no* twice." Johnson then spoke of the conspiracy theorists who were blaming Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and Cuban dictator Fidel Castro.

"All I want you to do is look at the facts ... and determine who killed the president. And I think you can put on your uniform of World War I, fat as you are ... and do anything you could to save one American life ... and I'm surprised that you, the chief justice of the U.S., would turn me down ... And he started crying and said, 'Well, I won't turn you down ... I'll just do

whatever you say.'"

The Warren Commission, as it came to be called, ultimately concluded Kennedy had been killed by a single assailant, Lee Harvey Oswald.

At first, Johnson, a Texan, balked at the idea of a federal commission, telling columnist Joseph Alsop the murder should be investigated by Texas authorities instead of "a bunch of carpetbaggers."

In a call to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, the new president confided that a presidential commission, as suggested by the Washington Post, "would be very bad and put it right in the White House. Now we can't be checking up on every shooting scrape in the country."

LBJ asked Hoover to use his influence on the Post, to which the FBI director replied: "Frankly, I don't have much influence with the Post because frankly I don't read it, I view it like the Daily Worker." (The Daily Worker was the American Communist Party newspaper.)

On the day Kennedy was killed, Johnson made sympathy calls and humbly informed friends that he was "totally inadequate" for the presidency.